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## **PRELIMINARY STUDY OF PERSONAL MARKETING IN THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT: ATTRIBUTES AND PERCEPTION OF INTERNET USERS IN CROATIA**

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***Abstract***

*The paper focuses on the rapidly changing digital technologies and their influence on the development of personal marketing and personal branding. Digital technologies have fundamentally changed various personal and professional communication systems, as well as communication habits and attitudes of their users. Consequently, personal marketing has been strongly influenced by the development of information and communication technologies, especially internet and mobile availability. Personal web-sites, social networks, mobile applications and various other tools allow individuals to create their personal digital identities and allow self-positioning. The current usage of internet-based tools for personal branding and related preferences and attitudes of Croatian internet users were the main sections of the conducted research. Data was collected through an online survey. The preliminary research analysis is provided, which shows respondents' views on the impact of digital technologies*

*on privacy and online presence. Collected data shows extensive internet use, especially on a daily basis, empowered by omnipresence of mobile devices, smart phones and even wearables. In addition, users rely heavily on various social networks and mobile applications mostly for limited communication groups (friends and family). However, respondents are in general not familiar with online personal marketing and most of them don't have personal websites or other tools for personal branding.*

**Keywords:** *personal marketing, online personal branding, digital marketing, personal website, Croatia*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The global advances and development in information and communication technologies (ICT), empowered by the internet revolution of the 1990s, have irreversibly changed the position of the modern human society. Digital technologies have fundamentally and substantially changed personal and professional communication systems, as well as communication habits, attitudes and expectations of their users. The general population is increasingly utilizing and relying on digital technologies for various interaction needs and purposes, influenced by facilitated communication and increase of demand for services in the ICT sector.

It is because of these reasons that personal identity of the online individual is becoming extremely important. In the digitally connected world, the concept of privacy is being transformed at the significant pace. Moreover, the level and quality of available internet information space is motivating the user to even compromise its own privacy in order to create a digital identity and harness its potential. Digital technologies clearly represent a key-component in the process of shaping the digital personal identity but the approach of utilizing the digital possibilities is of the equal value. Consequently, personal branding was strongly influenced by the development of information and communication technologies, especially the social, mobile and local elements (Laudon & Traver, 2016) of omnipresent digital technologies. Digital communication possibilities provide virtually endless opportunities for personal promotion and personal branding thus increasing the importance of individuals' familiarity with digital technologies. For the modern, digitally accessible professional it is imperative to perceive oneself as a business in order to take responsible and sensible approach for the future (Montoya & Vandehey, 2002).

Personal marketing is still a somewhat unexplored topic for focused research efforts within the academic community. However, personal marketing is becoming an important issue, especially in connection with "the marketing of individuals" (Nessmann, 2010) among the career management professionals. In order to explore the concept of personal marketing and its position within the digital environment, the concept of electronic marketing is used with special

focus on several e-marketing elements: (personal) websites, blogs, social networks and virtual worlds in particular. The foundation of any online personal brand is a (personal) website where individuals generally start their identity-shaping journey of presenting themselves in the digital environment (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010): the personal website represents their primary online location. Building on the website, various social networks complement the online identity and allow individuals numerous additional communication and interaction channels.

At the beginning of the paper, the overwhelming influence of digital technologies is addressed along with several implications on both business-oriented and social changes. A brief overview of theoretical background of personal marketing and personal branding is provided together with literature review of recent scientific and professional research papers. The main research problem was the lack of clear understanding of user awareness of the potential of digital technologies in the context of personal marketing and personal branding. The main objective was to explore the habits, attitudes, behavior patterns and related preferences of Croatian internet users about the internet usage and the existence of personal marketing based on personal websites, social networks and other elements of individual digital presence.

## **2. INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES**

Possibilities of digital technologies are expanding along with numerous provided services, all easily and globally accessible to their users. With the growth of influence of digital technologies, users take the central place in the modern, user-centric economies. In the marketing context, users are directly affecting various businesses. Digitally available consumers have numerous channels at their disposal which are constantly utilized for expressing views and opinions about businesses, products and services, people, ideas and virtually anything on their minds. Moreover, there is always someone listening to the combined voices of hyper-connected society, including the media.

In the advent of Web 2.0 and social networking, the reputation, influence and importance of businesses can be measured with the number of likes, shares, comments, retweets or repins, or simply put, by the conversation that a business can generate in the digital information space. The social media phenomenon (Kietzmann et al., 2011) brings substantial and omnipresent changes in communication between businesses, communities and individuals. Mangold & Faulds (2009) argue that social media is in fact a hybrid element of the promotion mix as it enables business to communicate to their customers, while at the same time it enables customers to communicate to one another without the traditional control. The conversation is empowered by content marketing which can be perceived as the next step in the integrated marketing communication efforts or even as a communication technique opposed to advertising (Dobaj et al., 2015). Content marketing tends to attract the attention with the quality content the users

actually want, as opposed to aggressive communication approach of imposing irrelevant or useless information. Irritating mass advertising is replaced by useful tailored content which helps in providing the desired user experience instead of distracting them. The social media have clearly transformed the digital environment from a platform for information, to a platform for influence (Hanna et al., 2011).

In today's modern and technologically advanced society, several distinct views on technological influence on individuals can be observed. Fatayerji (2004) suggests that digital technologies had a positive contribution on modern society, especially in the light of consumerism and consumer-oriented society. Digital technologies are perceived as the greatest source in the knowledge economy during the last few decades mainly because the knowledge economy is based on creation and distribution of data and information (Starčević, 2013). Gil de Zúniga et al. (2012) concluded that seeking information on social networks is a significant predictor of people's social capital and political participatory behavior. However, the influence of digital technologies can have a different context. Bates et al. (2000) describe the influence of digital technologies on academic community where the mere idea of technology adoption is perceived as a necessarily positive one and the lack of adoption can be viewed as old fashioned or even outdated. The use of digital technologies is also linked to building personal reputation and trust among peers.

Many authors provide data on how internet and digital technologies affect user opinions and purchase behavior. The majority of purchase decision shaping is happening at the computer or other connected device (Nielsen, 2015). Moreover, over 80% of consumers tend to trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations (Anderson, 2014) despite the fact that those reviews are provided by total strangers. Mobile devices as individualized communication tools have enabled global access to digital information while enabling the engagement with desired content at the time and place of consumer preference (Biloš et al., 2016). More than 50% of web searches are conducted on mobile devices in comparison with computers while consumers spend more time using mobile applications (or apps in short) than watching TV (Husson, 2016). Clear boundaries between websites and mobile apps use will most likely continue to gradually fade as the users spend more time on fewer mobile apps; among which specific instant messaging apps are virtually shaping distinct ecosystems. Furthermore, several apparent trends are gaining momentum: IoT – Internet of Things, AI – Artificial Intelligence and VR – virtual reality will most likely develop significantly in the future and affect the digital landscape.

Recent assumptions empower incredible predictions which will start the true revolution of digital technologies' influence on everyday life. Alhajj & Rokne (2014) explain the social media usage as a tool for predicting or detecting early warnings of specific events. Usually major topics, popular events and breaking news attract the public attention even in the early development stages. The data is gathered through social media analysis and detection of small changes

in views, opinions and topics in the development. Cautious analysis in pattern-changes result with the possibility of trend prediction in real time. Namely, Twitter message analysis was used to predict the reviews for upcoming films (Asur & Huberman, 2010) and blog analysis was utilized for predicting the sudden growth in book sales (Gruhl et al., 2005).

Digital technologies have enabled individuals to shape their digital identities. The significance of digital reputation management is slowly but notably being recognized on a global scale. Individuals with the skills, time and confidence to manage the “online chaos” gain access to new career opportunities and find target-audiences for their work (Harris & Rae, 2011). Social media gives the opportunity to the individuals to promote themselves as brands in a time and cost efficient manner (Karaduman, 2013). Personal branding skills can be extended to any company or organization for their social branding, while managing a tailored digital presence has the greatest potential for developing the exposure of individuals and organizations (Wetsch, 2012). Furthermore, self-storytelling is a powerful factor of personal branding in online communities (Pera et al., 2016). In addition, social networks and social media in general have become mainstream platforms among professional recruiters. The investment in social media recruiting is increasing while the money spent on traditional recruiting methods is decreasing (Ward & Yates, 2013; Wetsch, 2012).

Swarbreck & Rogers (2016) emphasized the importance of personal branding and its process in the modern age. The digital technologies are affecting the increasing number of individuals who need to adapt to business environment by adopting various electronic media. There are numerous issues regarding the process, challenges and implications of personal branding. Labrecque et al. (2010) focused on the process of digital branding and challenges in shaping the online image and reputation. Shepherd (2005) provided the theoretical concept in fundamental research of personal marketing and personal branding. In addition, Dutta (2010) explored personal strategies in social media usage and Smith et al. (2012) differentiated the personal generated content as a personal branding technique. Several additional authors focused on personal marketing and personal branding in the context of rapidly changing digital technologies (Wright, 2014; Ferenčić, 2012) which will be addressed in more detail.

### **3. PERSONAL MARKETING AND PERSONAL BRANDING**

Since the late 1990s, personal marketing and personal branding have become increasingly popular topics, especially in the USA. Clearly, the difference between personal marketing and personal branding can be understood as a corresponding difference between marketing and branding within the marketing paradigm where marketing is the concept of the highest order. In addition, the term personal identity is often used when describing personal

branding where identity is treated as one of its key components. However, it should be noted that various authors provide somewhat conflicting definitions and explanations of these terms. Balmer (2001) detected and described a similar scope issue with corporate identity, branding and marketing. A brief literature overview is provided hereinafter.

Personal marketing or self-marketing (Shepherd, 2005) consists of various activities undertaken by individuals to make themselves visible in the marketplace, increasing their exposure. Personal marketing strategies are complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic and individuals are encouraged to undertake those activities for themselves. A similar process is occurring with the more “arcane activity” of personal branding, as Shepherd (2005) puts it. Personal branding concept is usually connected with personal marketing and combination of core and extended personal identity (Shaker & Hafiz, 2014). The personal branding concept is a relatively new phenomenon and marketing construct; hence the available scientific literature is still rather limited. Personal branding emerged as a movement in the late 1990s and the popularization of the term is generally attributed to two important authors: Tom Peters, arguably due to an article entitled *The Brand Called You* (Peters, 1997) and Peter Montoya (Lair et al., 2005). Personal branding has been studied from several different standpoints: in connection to the sociological concept of the “self”, the potential to draw the interest of potential employers, as well as in connection to “cyber-vetting”, an activity employers use to verify the information that job candidates have posted online. (Nolan, 2015). Having a strong personal brand is an important asset in today’s digital environment (Rampersad, 2008). Bendish et al. (2013) examine and identify differences between products and people as brands and explore the model of establishing chief executive officers (CEOs) as brands. They continue to conclude that CEO brands can be considered as personal brands and that contemporary branding processes can be applied to CEOs while taking several specifics into account. However, numerous studies focused on the significance of having a strong personal brand but many ignored the challenges of developing one in the digital environment (Shaker & Hafiz, 2014). Furthermore, the concept of online personal branding has rarely been examined from a personal perspective, despite its obvious significance (Chen, 2013).

Zarkada (2012) argued that personal branding is a repositioned process to which the input is a person’s identity, the method is communication and the output is achieving career objectives. In other words, personal branding is a strategic process; it evolves around an individual who intentionally takes control of how others perceive him (or her) and manages those perceptions strategically in order to achieve desired goals (Montoya & Vandehey, 2002). Personal branding does the same for individuals as the marketers do for products or services. Often the term is connected with the negative connotations of personal communication: overt self-promotion, blatant ego boosting or faking authenticity. However, true form of personal branding should be the opposite of those negatively perceived outcomes. In order to make authentic disclosure (especially

within the digital environment), individuals should engage in self-assessment and strive to find out significant personal aspects (Shaker & Hafiz, 2014).

Rampersad (2008) suggested that successful personal branding involves managing perceptions effectively while controlling and influencing how others perceive an individual; it involves creating the externally facing personal identity. Building a personal brand can serve as a pathway to professional success. Philbrick & Cleveland (2015) argued that every personal brand is a promise of value and performance. Similar to any marketing process, it is necessary to meet or even exceed the expectations of target audience. Shaping a personal brand on the correct assumption of audience mindset is of a vital importance, but communicating it appropriately to the target audience is a challenging process (Omojola, 2008). Personal brands are dynamic and they need to evolve with individuals' career changes and trends in the field (Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015).

Furthermore, personal branding concept shares the core similarities with personal selling as the unique attributes of an individual can be linked with successful selling techniques (Shepherd, 2005). Rampersad (2008) perceives the traditional personal branding as a concept that focuses on personal marketing, image building, outward appearances and self-promotion and continues to develop an organic, holistic and authentic personal branding model. Despite the importance of developing a coherent brand, Shepherd (2005) suggest that individuals usually develop multiple roles, online presences and personal images in personal, social and professional lives. In addition, what enables online collaboration move forward is a culture of trust (Harris & Rae, 2011).

Along with the dynamic development of digital technologies and internet popularity, personal branding is empowered with personal websites as a crucial platform for shaping a unique voice and self-promotion but also means of learning about others. Self-promotion allows an individual to convey the information, shape, develop and maintain its personal identity. Personal website is the only digital location that truly belongs to the individual and that is why all the combined communication efforts usually lead toward a personal website. In addition to personal website, various different creation and distribution platforms are utilized for shaping online personal identity. The dynamics of the online branding relationships have been transformed from "a company perspective and a one-dimensional occurrence to a personal perspective and a bidirectional social bond" (Chen, 2013) on social networks. Social networks provide a distinguishable way for individuals to develop their own personal brands (Kawano et al, 2012; Roberts & Roach, 2009). On almost every social media platform, users are ready to engage with companies or brands willingly. Social media creates great opportunities for personal branding efforts both for personal and corporate purposes (Karaduman, 2013).

Social media come in various shapes and forms. Zarella (2009) suggested eight most important ones: blogs, micro-blogs (Twitter), social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn), multimedia sharing websites (YouTube, Flickr),

social bookmarking websites (Digg, Reddit), review websites (TripAdvisor or Yelp), forums and virtual worlds (Second Live). It should be noted that most of these are actually different forms or categories of social networks. Ellison (2007) defined social networks as web-based services which enable individuals to form a public or semi-public personal profile within the regulated system, to create a list of different users which they share connections with and to manage those contacts. Social networks are quite a popular subject among marketing experts because of the wide range of relationship building possibilities with target audiences. Every social network has its own characteristics and challenges as well as user expectations, attitudes and behavior.

Labrecque et al. (2011) provided an overview paper of processes, challenges and implications of online personal branding and concluded that individuals tend to self-brand themselves using social media and overcome the obstacles they encounter during the process. In fact, self-branding is inevitable when participating in an online environment. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) suggested a systematic overview of social media by providing social media classification using concepts in the field of media research (social presence, media richness) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure); being the two key elements of social media. The aforementioned self-presentation concept suggests that people have the desire to control the impressions other people form of them in any type of social interaction (Goffman, 1959) with two objectives in mind: influencing others to gain rewards and creating an image that is consistent with one's personal identity. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) continue to propose six distinct types of social media based on concepts of social presence/media richness and self-presentation/self-disclosure: (1) collaborative projects, (2) blogs, (3) content communities, (4) social networking sites, (5) virtual game worlds, and (6) virtual social worlds.

Active participation in social media can be a powerful tool of online personal branding; it could provide a difference between progress and stagnation of pursuing personal goals (Dutta, 2010). However, managing a number of online personas is perceived as increasingly difficult while separating personal and professional worlds appears almost impossible without the adequate tools for control and management. Lindahl & Öhlund (2013) argued that the images were more efficient than text for the purpose of personal branding on social networks, namely on Instagram where they conducted the research. Individuals show only a selected part of their own identity on photo-intensive social networks and those platforms provide greater freedom in expressing their identity and their self. Furthermore, Nolan (2015) highlighted the importance of personal branding in the non-profit sector as it can help in engaging their executives in successful personal communications processes that raise awareness.

Finally, personal marketing and personal branding are linked with several conceptual and practical difficulties. Several authors offered a rather critical standpoint towards the personal marketing and/or personal branding concepts, at least to some extent (Shepherd, 2005). Lair et al. (2005) argued that



„personal branding offers such a startlingly overt invitation to self-commodification“. In addition, personal branding has also been criticized from a moral standpoint and described as a “blatant manifestation of the rampant cynicism of commercialism” (Zarkada, 2012). The same author continued to conclude that personal branding literature provided inconsistencies and raised moral objections to the practice. Vallas & Cummins (2015) found personal branding concept to be pervasive and uncritically incorporated into the career management ideology. As professionals (such as reporters) incorporate branding into their work-related routines, they may be irretrievably sacrificing the ability to simultaneously maintain a personal identity online (Holton & Molyneux, 2015). Lindahl & Öhlund (2013) noticed a distinct frustration among some users of photo-intensive social networks as many feel that the nuanced and perfected image that many people convey is “fake and annoying”. As a result, this could have a negative impact on that person’s personal brand.

#### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

Main research problem was the lack of clear understanding of user awareness of the potential of digital technologies in the context of personal marketing. The main objective was to explore the habits, attitudes, behavior patterns and related preferences of Croatian internet users about the internet usage and the existence of personal marketing based on personal websites, social networks and other elements of individual digital presence. In addition, the research was focused on user attitudes towards the influence of digital technologies, level of usage and future behavioral intentions. The primary research analysis is provided, which shows motivation and frequency of internet use, digital devices, use of personal websites and social networks and motivation behind specific digital communication channels.

The primary quantitative research was conducted and the data was collected through an online survey. An online questionnaire was tailored independently but its methodology was based on a number of academic papers, published research and related books (Pera et al., 2016; Moons & de Pelsmacker, 2015; Salpeter, 2013; Lindahl & Öhlund, 2013; Joensuu, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011; Malar et al., 2011; Marwick, 2010). The survey consisted of 21 questions distributed in two sections; the first one consisted of 14 questions related to the research problem and the rest were related to demographic attributes. The 14 questions were formed with 80 mandatory and 6 optional items. The most common question type was in a form of a closed-ended question based on 7-point Likert scale where every scale point had a textual description or elaboration. It should be mentioned that a number of variables were measured as a self-reporting item and as a result there could be a difference between perceived and actual variable value (such as the frequency of internet use).

Initially, the target group for the purposes of the research was highly educated employed citizens and internet users in Croatia. This target group was

selected due to the assumption that they have some extent of previous knowledge of (personal) marketing and that they use modern information communication technologies at some level of computer literacy which was connected with defined research objectives. However, in order to get a more comprehensive understanding and wider research scope, the research focus was expanded to general internet users in Croatia. Additional reason behind the expansion was to minimize the risk of creating a too narrow sample and consequently collecting unusable data. A pilot study was created and conducted in order to test the research instrument and avoid any impeding errors or confusion in the questionnaire. Several minor changes and refinements were implemented after the pilot study.

Online survey was created using a SurveyGizmo platform. Data was collected from April 26 until September 16 2016. Several techniques of respondent recruitment were used, namely personal website, Facebook, Twitter and Freelancer. Using Facebook platform, a specific link with tracking capabilities to the survey was shared in order to monitor the success rate of the shared link. In sum, 29 respondents were acquired through Facebook. A different specific link was shared through personal website, Twitter and by direct e-mail message and another 186 respondents were acquired. The last used technique was Freelancer platform and it was proven to be the most successful one: 203 respondents were acquired using Freelancer.

The online survey was accessed by 579 respondents. During the preliminary analysis of collected data, a total of 128 entries were flagged as unusable data and left out of the analysis process. In most cases, the data was flagged unusable due to survey abandonment by respondent within the first several survey items. Several entries were omitted from the analysis due to high probability of worthless data (significant difference in survey completion time in comparison with the survey average, detectable pattern in data entry or provided data inconsistency). The final analysis was based on 451 respondent entries, out of which 417 completed the survey and additional 34 with several missing data points, mostly in the last part of the survey (demographics related data). However, those 34 were accepted and used in the analysis because of the significance to the central survey elements.

The final sample consisted of 257 women (61.2%) and 163 men (38.8%), distributed in several age groups: under 18 years. – 6.44%; 18-24 years – 16.47%; 25-34 years – 40.57%; 35-44 years – 24.82%; 45-54 years – 7.40%; 55-64 years – 3.34%; and finally 65 years and above - 0.95%. The most common level of acquired professional qualification within the sample was university or art academy graduates at 40.2%, followed by high-school graduates at 33.1%, post-graduate degree (including PhD degree) at 12.9%, college graduates at 9.3% and finally primary school degree or less at 4.5%. Regarding the employment status, almost 70% (69.3%) of respondents were employed, 16.4% were students while the rest were unemployed (11%) or retired (3.3%). The segment of employed respondents expressed their position in the distribution of National

classification of activities (according to NN 58/07). Almost a third (32.2%) of respondents works in the field of education. Distribution of respondents regarding the classification of activities is dispersed more evenly in other fields. Based on respondent geographical location, it should be noted that even though almost all of the Croatian counties are represented, the distribution does not correspond to actual citizen distribution among the counties.

#### 4.1. Research results

The primary research analysis is provided, which shows respondent frequency of use as well as the views on the impact of digital technologies on privacy and online presence. More than a half of respondents (50.33%) reported using the internet almost constantly and an additional 45.5% reported going online several times a day. Consequently, the vast majority (95.83%) of respondents can be categorized as very frequent or extensive internet users (Biloš et al., 2017). Users tend to use various devices to access the internet. According to collected data, 42.95% respondents reported using smartphone almost constantly and a similar percentage (42.28%) reported the using smartphones several times a day, with additional 4.47% using smartphones for internet access once a day. In total, slightly less than 90% respondents reported using smartphones for accessing internet on a daily level. More than a half of respondents (52.47%) reported using a laptop for internet access on a daily level and 46.28% said the same for desktop computers. Clearly, smartphones and laptops tend to be the most popular device for internet access followed by desktop computers. On the other hand, tablets and non-smartphone mobile phones are less popular among respondents. Over three quarters of respondents reported using regular mobile phones (non-smartphones) very rarely or never and slightly less than 60% said the same for tablets.

Respondents spent on average 5.5 hours a day (with a mean score (M) of  $M = 5.5$  and a standard deviation (SD) of  $SD = 3.414$ ) using internet. In order to get a better understanding of the average spent time variable, the respondents were categorized into 3 groups: slightly more than a third of the respondents (34.5%) use internet up to 3 hours a day, approximately another third (34.2%) use internet between 3 and 6 hours a day and the rest use internet more than 6 hours per day.

Special attention in the research was directed towards social networks and their usage. Based on the collected data, the most popular social network among the respondents was convincingly Facebook, with 95.1% of respondents reported having a Facebook profile, followed by Google+ (47%) and Instagram (41.5%). Slightly over 1% (1.3%) of respondents reported not having a single social network profile. Detailed breakdown is presented in the following figure (Figure 1). While Facebook's superiority is quite obvious, it should be noted that many social networks are quite popular among internet users, according to the survey respondents.

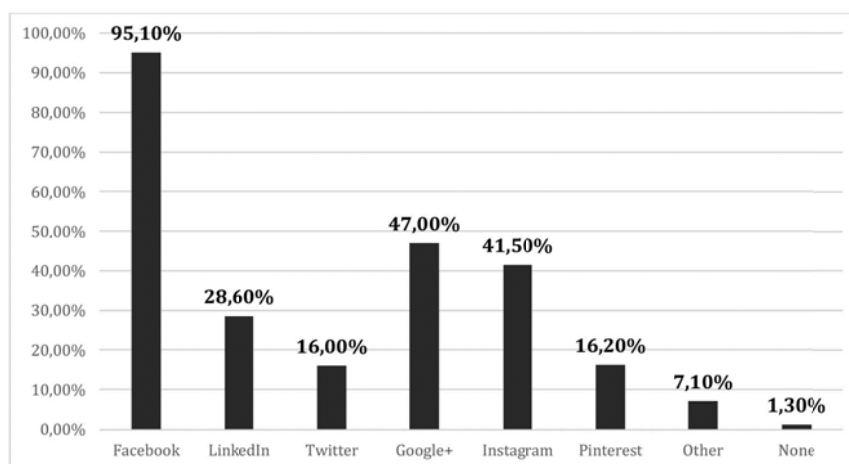


Figure 1 Popularity of major social networks

*Source: Authors' research*

Interestingly enough, the frequency of posting content online was quite different from use and consumption dynamics. Slightly over three quarters (75.6%) of respondents post content online with varying posting frequencies while the rest reported posting very rarely or never. The largest posting group of respondents suggested posting content online several times per month (29.49%). When analyzing cumulative percentages, it can be observed that 17.52% post content on a daily basis (once a day or more often) and 28.6% post content weekly (once a week or several times a week). In addition, the target group for online posting was tested using a 7-point scale with two opposite end-points: (1) posting exclusively to the private audience and (7) posting exclusively to the public, with neutral point (4) indicated posting equally to the private audience and the public. More than a half of the respondents (51.3%) reported posting exclusively to the private audience (family, friends and acquaintances) and only 2% reported posting exclusively to the public while 12.9% post equally to both audiences. In cumulative values, it is obvious that respondents were generally more focused on private audiences; more than three quarters (75.55%) reported at least some level of focus on private audience as opposed to only 11.6% who gave at least some extent of the posting advantage to the public. When considering the opportunities for personal branding, there is clearly a large unused space for more active approach in communication towards the public merely based on the idea that personal branding involves public communication efforts rather than communication with friends and family. However, it should be noted that the size and the structure of the private contact networks was not tested at this point. In addition, the effectiveness of social networks for personal branding relies on the specific objectives an individual has set which should be taken into account when evaluating the usage of social networks.

Furthermore, the respondents were asked to assess their personal familiarity with the concept of personal e-marketing using a 7-point scale ranging from: (1) never heard about the concept (not at all familiar) to (7) absolutely familiar with the concept. The largest respondent group, accounting to almost 30% reported they are slightly (2) familiar with the concept and almost 10% reported they are not familiar at all. Detailed breakdown is presented in the following figure (Figure 2).

In order to simplify the data interpretation, ordinal variables can be recoded into numerical, while acknowledging the related challenges in doing so. The average mean score is  $M = 3,36$  (with  $SD = 1,69$ ) which can be interpreted that respondents showed a below average level of familiarity with the concept of personal e-marketing and there is a significant space for education and improvement on many levels.

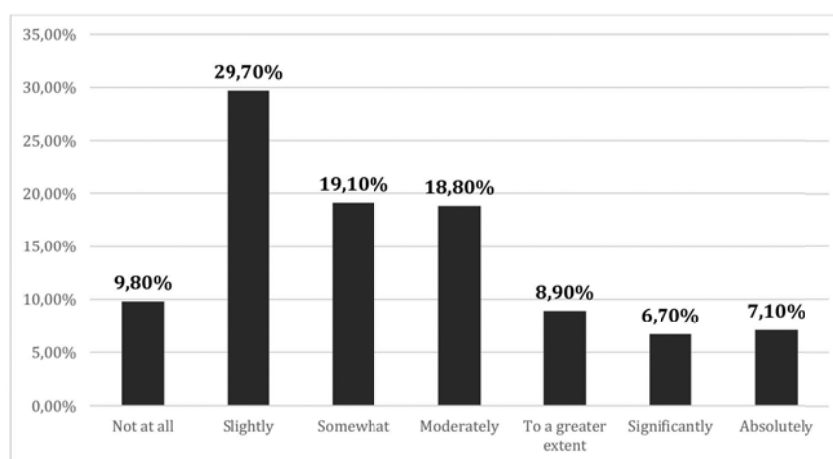


Figure 2 Level of familiarity with the concept of personal e-marketing

Source: Authors' research

Taking into account the significance of personal websites, the respondents were asked if they have a personal website while emphasizing that profiles on social networks do not fit into the category. More than 90% of respondents suggested that they do not have a personal website which implies that despite the strong development and availability of often free tools for creating websites, the opportunity is not perceived as interesting or useful to end-users. Furthermore, the respondents who suggested not having a personal website were asked would they like having one in the future. The largest respondent group (44%) reported they do not want a personal website, 38.9% were unsure and only 17% reported they want a personal website in the future. The respondents who suggested having a personal website (8.9%) reported that the primary goal of having a personal website is mostly linked with self-promotion, work-related goals and showcasing CVs online. When asked about the usage of paid services on

social networks (such as advertising, premium profiles and the like) the respondents reported to the greatest extent that they haven't used it yet (81.9%).

In addition, respondents were asked to express their personal level of agreement with several statements based on a 7-point Likert scale where end-points indicated (1) strong disagreement or (7) strong agreement. The respondents tend to agree with the statement that a personal website is a great tool for self-promotion in the digital environment; 56.15% agrees with the statement at least to some extent (cumulative percentage of respondents who expressed at least some level of agreement with the statement). However, slightly over one quarter (25.06%) expressed a neutral view (they neither agreed nor disagreed). When asked about the influence of online identity, only 34% of the respondents agree to some extent that online identity actually influences their personal lives while 43.56% tends to disagree with the same statement. In addition, 63.4% of respondents tend to agree that they usually get more positive than negative comments online while the percentage of those who disagree and those who are neutral are the same, at 18.3%. When asked about the influence of digital technologies on user privacy, 47.77% of respondents tend to agree that digital technologies indeed affect the lack of privacy and additional 19.87% are unsure about the statement. Detailed breakdown is presented in the following figure (Figure 3).

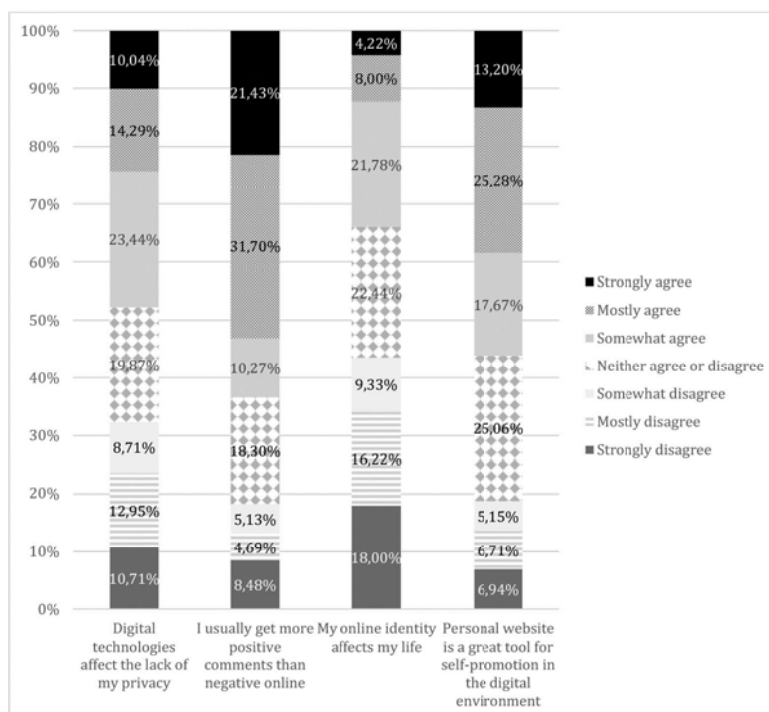


Figure 3 Level of agreement with the provided statements

Source: Authors' research

Finally, respondents expressed their view on the importance of personal as opposed to business objectives in life, using a 7-point scale with two opposite end-points being: (1) exclusively personal objectives and (7) exclusively business objectives with a neutral point (4) for equal importance of personal and business objectives. The data suggested that personal and business objectives are equally important for 46.64% respondents, while 43.05% give at least some advantage to personal objectives. It could be concluded that respondents mostly wish to balance their personal and work-related objectives although personal objectives tend to be more important if compared to business related objectives.

In depth analysis showed some instances of statistically significant differences between the segments within the sample. Namely, while comparing employed respondents and others, there is no apparent difference in frequency of internet use and device selection with the exception of slightly higher laptop usage among employed respondents and others ( $M1a = 4.46$ ,  $SD1a = 1.66$ ;  $M1b = 3.88$ ,  $SD1b = 1.66$  respectively; T-test:  $t = 2.497$ ,  $df = 418$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ). However, employed respondents are more familiar with the personal e-marketing concept ( $M2a = 3.51$ ,  $SD2a = 2.13$ ;  $M2b = 3.05$ ,  $SD2b = 2.26$  respectively; T-test:  $t = 2.657$ ,  $df = 418$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and tend to agree more with the statement about personal website being a great tool for self-promotion ( $M3a = 4.81$ ,  $SD3a = 1.67$ ;  $M3b = 4.36$ ,  $SD3b = 1.63$  respectively; T-test:  $t = 2.526$ ,  $df = 418$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ). However, it should be noted that the applicable level of those differences is quite limited.

#### 4.2. Limitations and further research guidelines

The conducted research suffers from several limitations which need to be recognized and taken into account when drawing conclusions. First and foremost, the limitations are connected to the sampling process and several sample attributes. A sample consists of more female respondents (61.2%) and two central age groups: 25-34 years (40.6%) and 35-44 years (24.8%). Geographical distribution is unbalanced and heterogeneous although all the counties are represented within the sample. In addition, the respondents are mostly highly-educated (53.1%) and employed persons (69.3%). All these limitations definitely affect the quality of the sample and consequently the ability to draw conclusions. When taking into account the used sample-generating techniques, these are all objective research circumstances which could not be affected directly without significant input of funds. However, the collected data and conducted analysis can provide at least a partial overview of current state of internet population in Croatia especially in connection with the influence of digital technologies on personal marketing potential. These findings may serve as an indicator of current state and provide several guidelines for additional research efforts.

Guidelines for further research may include a bigger representative sample of internet users in Croatia with a special emphasis on a more balanced geographical distribution, age group proportion, education level and employment

status. In addition, there are several connected topics which may be interesting for additional exploration such as the level of personal branding adoption, trust in personal brands and popular CEO brands. Furthermore, the adoption, frequency, satisfaction and usefulness of new digital wearable devices (such as smart watches, smart bracelets, smart glasses and similar devices) might be a valuable addition to current research efforts mainly because those devices allow constant digital immersion of users and even higher level of sharing personal information. A topic of user privacy could be explored in more detail and from several different standpoints. A number of variables in the survey were created as self-reporting items where respondents estimated a value based on past behavior which could be an additional limitation of the collected data and could consequently affect several of the derived conclusions. Therefore, future research activities should consider a more objective measurement of the data. In addition, future research efforts should focus on data comparison between different countries and time-related changes and trends. Finally, the available academic and professional research on this topic is still rather limited, thereby providing an unexplored area as well as a clear need for further research.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper focuses on the rapidly changing digital technologies and its influence on the development of personal marketing and personal branding. The omnipresent advances in digital technologies have affected the entire world and are additionally responsible for growing globalization. The continuous wave of technological development influenced various levels of professional and personal lives of individuals and consequently introduced the concept of personal e-marketing. Personal marketing generally exceeds technological boundaries and it is usually based on a belief that every action of an individual affects its personal brand. Available digital technologies provide individuals a wide range of possibilities for self-promotion and branding which was elaborated through a literature review and elaborated components of personal marketing. With adoption of personal websites and profiles on various social networks, an individual can meticulously shape its digital personal identity. The importance of personal websites and social networks is addressed in the context of personal branding activities. It has become a rather standard procedure for global leaders, celebrities, professionals and other respected individuals to shape and nourish their digital presence while utilizing numerous interactive communication channels in order to grow their popularity and reach target objectives.

Provided data shows extensive internet use, especially on a daily level, empowered by omnipresence of mobile devices, especially smartphones, and even wearables. Respondents spent on average 5.5 hours a day using internet. The vast majority (95,83%) of respondents can be categorized as extensive internet users. Smartphones and laptops tend to be the most popular devices for internet access followed by desktop computers. In addition, users rely heavily on various



social networks and mobile applications mostly for limited communication groups (friends and family). The most popular social network among the respondents was convincingly Facebook, with 95.1% of respondents reported having a Facebook profile, followed by Google+, Instagram and several others. Slightly over three quarters (75.6%) of respondents post content online with variable posting frequencies. However, respondents are in general not familiar with online personal marketing concept and most of them don't have personal websites or utilize other tools for personal branding. Despite the fact that the respondents tend to agree with the statement that a personal website is a great tool for self-promotion in the digital environment, the majority of respondents don't see having a personal website in the future. Provided data analysis shows the significant influence of digital technologies on individuals and their, slightly limited, understanding of that process and connected potential of leveraging digital platforms for personal marketing and personal branding.

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## **PRELIMINARNO ISTRAŽIVANJE OSOBNOG MARKETINGA U DIGITALNOM OKRUŽENJU: ATRIBUTI I PERCEPCIJA KORISNIKA INTERNETA U HRVATSKOJ**

**Sažetak**

*Rad je usredotočen na brze promjene digitalnih tehnologija i njihov utjecaj na razvoj osobnog marketinga i osobnog brendiranja. Digitalne tehnologije su od temelja promijenile različite osobne i poslovne komunikacijske sustave, kao i komunikacijske navike i stavove njihovih korisnika. U skladu s tim, na osobni marketing snažno je utjecao razvoj informacijsko-komunikacijskih tehnologija, posebice interneta i mobilne dostupnosti. Osobna web-sjedišta, društvene mreže, mobilne aplikacije i drugi alati omogućavaju pojedincima oblikovanje osobnih digitalnih identiteta i osobno pozicioniranje. Glavne cjeline provedenog istraživanja govore o trenutnoj upotrebi internetskih alata za osobno brendiranje, kao i povezane preferencije i stavove internetskih korisnika u Hrvatskoj. Podaci su prikupljeni internetskom anketom. Analiza provedenog primarnog istraživanja pokazuje stavove ispitanika o utjecaju digitalnih tehnologija na privatnost i mrežnu prisutnost. Istraživanje pokazuje visoku razinu korištenja internetom, posebice na dnevnoj razini, uz oslanjanje na sveprisutne mobilne uređaje te mobilne aplikacije za zatvorene komunikacijske grupe (obitelj i prijatelji). Uz spomenuto, ispitanici nisu u većoj mjeri upoznati s mrežnim osobnim marketingom te većina ne posjeduje osobno web-sjedište i ne koristi se drugim alatima za osobno brendiranje.*

**Ključne riječi:** *osobni marketing, mrežno osobno brendiranje, digitalni marketing, osobno web-sjedište, Hrvatska.*

**JEL klasifikacija:** *D80, L86, M31, O33.*



